Mentally ill denied rights by the “sane”

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In physical illness, it is the suffering individual who complains. “I have difficulty breathing,” he says, or “I have a pain in my side,” as he goes to the physician for treatment. The patient may or may not take the physicians advice, although he usually does. He is a free agent.

In the case of “mental illness,” however, It is not as a rule the ill person who complains, but his relatives or neighbors who ask a court to refer the individual for psychiatric examination. The individual may be happy enough, although behaving in ways that trouble his associates. But if they can get a psychiatrist to diagnose the individual as “mentally ill,” they can have him committed to a mental hospital for an indefinite term – even for the rest of his life.

It will do the individual no good to protest, “there's nothing wrong with me!” He has been classified as “mentally ill” and others take over the control of his life — of course for his own good.

How do we talk about people who behave in strange or socially unacceptable ways or entertain bizarre ideas? It makes a world of difference what language we use. It is one thing to say of such people that they are wicked or misguided or wrong. If they are wicked, perhaps they can be shown the harmful consequences of their behavior. If they are misguided or wrong, perhaps they can be corrected.

But to say they are “mentally ill” is to deny them the elementary human attribute of rationality. It is therefore to regard them and treat them as subhuman.

The contrast between how society treats physical and mental illness is illustrated visibly by what happens when a member of Jehovah's Witnesses is told that he requires an operation involving a blood transfusion. As many know, blood transfusions are forbidden for members of this sect. Even when physicians regard this prohibition as “crazy” they respect such a patient’s wishes.

A patient, in having been classified as “physically ill,” is given credit for making what is to him a rational choice within the framework of his beliefs and values.

No such respect for the patient’s rationalities is shown to the person who is diagnosed as “mentally ill.” As Dr. Thomas Szasz, professor of psychiatry at State University of New York Upstate Medical Center in Syracuse writes: “There are two basic ways in which a person may be penalized in our present society. One is by running afoul of the law. The other is by running afoul of psychiatrists.”

Law sets forth fairly clear rules and penalties governing legal and illegal behavior. But there are no such clearcut standards for normal and deviant behavior. What is normal in the U.S. may be deviant in Japan; what is normal in San Francisco may be {and often is) outrageous in Freeport, Maine.

But once a psychiatrist has declared a person “mentally ill” he can be subject to commitment in a way that is in total violation of his civil liberties. As Dr. Szasz continues, thus the patient has no counter-diagnostician “comparable to the defense attorney … and the patient finds himself in legal jeopardy without having broken the law or being accused of a crime, and without having been tried and convicted.” Having been defined as incapable of reason, he cannot argue his way out.

The American Association for the Abolition of Involuntary Mental Hospitalization led by Dr. Szasz, the psychologist Erving Goffman, and Dean George Alexander of the school of law, University of Santa Clara, held its first organizational meeting in Syracuse October 2. It's purposes first are to distinguish sharply between voluntary and involuntary mental hospitalization and to promote legislative and judicial actions making such involuntary psychiatric intervention unlawful.

Essentially it is an organization dedicated to securing for those accused of “mental illness” the same elementary rights enjoyed by those accused of breaking the law.

Dr. Szasz declares himself “wholly in favor” of voluntary hospitalization, which he compares to going to the church of one's choice.

“At this moment,” Dr. Szasz writes, “thousands of American citizens are being forced to submit to psychiatric ‘therapies’ against their will; to loss of liberty, to lifelong stigmatizations, to extremely toxic drugs, to brain-damaging effects of electric shock, and until recently, even to such incredible barbarities as lobotomy. I submit that this is nothing less than a crime to humanity.

Maggie Scarf, in a recent *New York Times Magazine* article, quotes a critic of Dr. Szasz's latest book, “*The Manufacturer of Madness,”* as saying “there is something in it to offend practically everybody.” Clearly, anyone who can offend almost anybody is a brilliant and original thinker. I don't think Dr. Szasz's theories can be ignored.

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